

# Juneteenth - An unforgettable Moment of History

On June 19, 1865, Major General Gordon Granger and a regiment of Union soldiers arrived in Galveston, Texas, with the news that the war between the states had ended.

General Robert E. Lee had surrendered the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia to Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant at the home of Wilmer McLean near the town of Appomattox, Va. The long-delayed news that President Abraham Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation on Jan. 1, 1863, freeing the slaves, was announced by General Granger.

General Order Number 3 read by Major Granger began, "The people of Texas are informed that in accordance with the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free.

This involves an absolute equality of rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and free laborer." The Order also paroled the Confederate soldiers and all laws passed by the Confederate government were void.

The question of why Texas had a two-and-half year delay in receiving the news will probably never be answered. The versions and responsibility for transmitting the proclamation takes in account several documented historical legends. One account tells the story of the" messenger who was murdered on his way to Texas with the news of freedom. Another story tells that freedom was withheld by the enslavers to maintain the labor force on the plantations."

The General Order freed more than 250,000 slaves in Texas. It was read from plantation to plantation throughout Texas. From the "Texas Slave Narratives," Andy Anderson said, "My marster am'nounced we surrendah and dat dey am free." Freedom for some ex-slaves meant heading North but for others it was an opportunity to search for family members in the neighboring states of Louisiana,

Oklahoma and Arkansas.

Prior to June 19, 1863, slaves were unaware that Lincoln had issued the Executive Order. The abolition of slavery and emancipation was received with great celebration and annual celebrations in many African-American communities in Texas developed into the tradition of Juneteenth. Also known as Freedom Day or Emancipation Day was a day of celebrating African American heritage and commemorated the announcement of the abolition of slavery. Although Juneteenth festivities differ from state to state, the food, prayer and a connection to the spirit of the ancestors were tradition. "During the initial days of the emancipation celebrations, there were accounts of former slaves tossing their ragged garments into the creeks and to adorn themselves in clothing taken from the plantations belonging to the former masters."

During the early years of Juneteenth celebration, African-Americans received resistance and were often barred from public displays of gathering. Often these early celebrations were hosted in rural surroundings which provided activities like fishing, barbecues and horseback riding. As African-Americans acquired land, the celebrations began to grow. During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's, Atlanta demonstrators wore Juneteenth freedom bottoms. The Poor People's March to Washington, DC "called for people of all races, creeds, economic levels and professions to come to Washington DC to show support for the poor. Many of these attendees returned home and initiated Juneteenth celebrations in areas of the country previously absent of such activities."

Juneteenth became an official state holiday in Texas in 1980 with the passage of a bill which marked it as the first emancipation celebration granted official state recognition. Thirty six states have recognized Juneteenth as a state holiday or state holiday observance. Presently, Rev. Ronald V. Myers Sr. has introduced legislation to make Juneteenth a national day of observance.

Today Juneteenth is the oldest known celebration commemorating the end of slavery in the United States.

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